

# MY LIFE AND MUSIC

by Billy Clifford



Music session in London mid-1960's. John Clifford with accordion, Billy Clifford on his left.

**I WAS BORN** in London in 1943 during World War Two. I don't remember anything about the war, but I do remember my mother telling my brother John and myself about the air raid sirens going off and she having to scramble to an air raid shelter with us. I was actually born in Maygrove Road, Kilburn. Some people used to call it Co. Kilburn on account of all the Irish people living there at that time.

John and myself are the only ones left in the family now. We had two addresses in Willesden, London. The second one of these, 260, Chapter Road, is the one I remember best. London was a nice place to live then. I'll always remember my first day at school, and one or two little things about my first years there. I was 'delicate' as they used to say, as a child, and I remember being teased because I had a larger than normal stomach. I got very annoyed one day when this was happening and I decided to get my own back. I punched the offender in the mouth and knocked out one of his teeth.

My father, (John also), worked in Hanley Pages aircraft factory during the war. This was only one of umpteen jobs he had. My mother, Julia, worked in hotels around London as a chambermaid. She remembered meeting famous film stars of the past, such as Edward G. Robinson and Errol Flynn. Both my father and mother worked in the dance halls, playing in the bands. My father played the piano accordion and my mother played the fiddle, of course. The bands were made up of English and Irish musicians. The English players catered mostly for the quicksteps, fox trots, etc., which were popular in those days. But they also joined in when the Irish music was played. Most of them played by sight reading from a music book. The usual book was *The Irish Fiddler*. This book is still available today and a lot of tunes have English names, e.g. *The Liverpool Hornpipe*, *The Manchester Hornpipe*.

The dancehall music continued on through the 40s, 50s and 60s. The venues were *The Banba*, *The Stadium*, *Cricklewood*, *Tottenham Court Road*, (over *Burton's*) and others which I can't

remember because I was very young at the time.

When John and I were young, my mother used to bring us back to Kerry on holidays. I really loved it there, the open country, lovely green fields to play in, the farmyard, the animals. Of course this was my mother's place. My other grandparents were living in a nice little cottage only a short distance back the road in Lisheen. Both houses were in Lisheen, near Gneeveguilla. I liked it so much that I said to my mother that I would like to stay there. She agreed to this one year. This coincided with my uncle Denis going back to America where he lived with his wife, Julia Mary. He had been in Ireland to attend to certain matters, and he was quite happy to go back to America knowing that my grandmother had company.

I think the year was 1952 when I stayed with my grandmother in Lisheen. She was a lovely lady and was probably in her 70s at the time; a very holy woman, the Rosary beads were always in her hands. She was constantly praying. My grandfather died sometime around 1947/8 and I

don't remember him at all. But I do believe he was a nice player on the fife and whistle. Of course I never heard him playing, except somebody gave me a 25-second recording of him playing the whistle a few years ago. He was involved in the Lisheen Fife and Drum Band, back in the 1920s or 1930s. That type of band was popular in those days. They played lovely marches and introductory sections before each set of tunes.

I went to school in Gneeveguilla for about two years and my brother John also attended there for a while, because he and my parents came back from England to live in Ireland.

It was during the time that I spent with my grandmother that I took to learning the tin whistle. She gave me the first tune and I carried on from there. Also, at that time, the second next house back the road was occupied by Aut Keeffe and his sister Hanna. Now Aut was a very fine player on the whistle, or, as they used to call it, the whistler. Their mother, Nāno Carey, also lived there at that time and she was a lovely lady. I can remember her lying in her bed because I suppose



John and Julia Clifford. (Mid-1960's)



**The Star of Munster Céili Band. Circa 1958.**

**L-R: Pats Moloney, Liam Moloney, Drummer ?, Julia Clifford, Noreen O'Connell and John Clifford**

she was confined to it. She used to give me money wrapped up in newspaper. She had a heart of gold. I got an awful shock when the poor creature passed away because I went back to the wake and it was my first time seeing a person dead. This lovely, generous person just lay there and it upset me.

Going back to Aut Keffe – apart from being a very good musician, he was also a fine singer. There are some archival recordings of him and my grandfather, Bill Murphy (Bill the Weaver), in Cecil Sharpe House, London. I have a couple of short pieces of music and maybe one song played by Aut on a recording and it is surely the most deeply traditional and beautiful music.

There was another whistle player living back near the Quarry Cross which is half way between Lisheen and Gneeveguilla. His name was Dan Dave Dan. Cronin was his surname. He was also a fine player and he has been recorded by the famous Ciaran Mac Mathuna of Radio Éireann fame.

I think that towards the end of my stay in Lisheen my uncle, Denis Murphy, came back from America and I rejoined by parents and brother and we went to Newcastlewest, Co. Limerick to live. So along with my brother, I had to attend another primary school and we also went to the secondary school there.

Needless to say, I got my music from my uncle when he came back from America as well as a few

tunes I got from Aut. Then when I rejoined my parents I learned a lot of music. Around about 1955 my father decided to form a céili band. This consisted of the three of ourselves and a very talented musical family from Templeglantine, Co. Limerick, called the Moloney family. Three of the family played with us. Liam played piano accordion and button accordion, Pats played saxophone and banjo and Biddy (who is still alive) played piano. The only odd one out was the drummer, and we had a few of those. But the best of them was Paddy 'Sport' Murphy. He was a dinger on the bones and very few people played them at that time. He is also still alive and well. We also had a few different pianists and one of these was Noreen O'Connell from Abbeyfeale, Co. Limerick. There is one outstanding recording made by Ciaran Mac Mathuna of Noreen playing with my mother and Denis Murphy. They played two reels: The Ewe Reel and Farewell to Erin. It's a classic recording.

I almost forgot to mention that the name of the band was 'The Star of Munster Céili Band'. We travelled throughout Ireland. We went up as far as Roscommon and we played several times in the Irish Club in Dublin. The band often went to Co. Clare. Two of the venues were: The Queen's Hotel, Ennis and a hall in Newmarket-on-Fergus. There were lots of engagements all over Cork and Carlow as well. Denis Murphy would join us for the most prestigious venues, like The Irish Club, Dublin.



1994. Billy Clifford with his mother playing the stroh fiddle.



Billy Clifford with two of his pupils.

We would all pack into one car, usually Liam Moloney's Ford Consul, and there could be eight of us. If the gear lever hadn't been situated just beside the steering wheel, we would never have managed. Of course there was a roof rack to help take the instruments, plus an amplifier and microphones. You can imagine taking off for Dublin and at that time 50 mph would be the fastest you could go, or even maybe 40mph. I have great memories of playing with the band. I was about 14 years at the time and playing the tin whistle. Needless to say, I never got any money for playing in the band but one night, out of the blue, we were playing in the local hall in Templeglantine, Co. Limerick, and at the end of the night Liam Moloney gave me ten shillings. This was the first bit of money I ever earned for playing music and I will always remember him for that.

The band also played on Radio Eireann and this occurred a few times. In those days you had to pass an audition before being allowed to play on the radio. I don't have to tell you that the band passed the audition with no problem, but they rejected me because I was playing a tin whistle which they regarded as a toy and not a professional instrument. So I never got to play with the band on the radio.

A number of years ago I went to Dublin to record an interview about my experiences in the old céili band era. Nicholas Carolan had something to do with it and I thought I might be able to listen to some of the old recordings of the band. But these

recordings were not to be found. However, I was told that there might be some chance of them being found in the future.

Going back to living in Newcastlewest, I enjoyed living there and the music was good around there. My mother and father taught music and we were often frequented by musicians calling out of the blue. Seamus Ennis was among some famous people who called. In spite of that I will have to say we saw hard times and money was very scarce. My father never had a proper job and my mother eventually ended up having to work in the County Home. This provided for us for a while, but we soon had to pack up again. So in 1959 we were on the move again. My parents went back to London early in the year and John and myself followed on in about June/July of that year.

London was a great place to find work in those days and we all got jobs. I got my first job in a small engineering company making Vernier gauges. But I soon found out that there was no future in it, so I got another job in a television factory with my brother who got a similar job. This particular company had a one-day release scheme whereby you could study electronics one day a week. So John and I eventually became T.V. service engineers.

I worked in London for 10 years and I had numerous jobs, all of them associated with T.V. repairs or electronics of some sort. I played a lot of music in London, especially at the weekends, and I got my first flute which I enjoyed playing



Billy Clifford on right with his wife, Catherine, sister-in-law Delia Chambers, daughter-in-law, Niamh, and son Denis.

because I felt it was more 'professional', apart from the lovely sound it made. Traditional music was very good in London during the 60s. Along with my parents, I played with some great musicians in those days. The ones I remember most are: Bobby Casey, Kevin Burke, Oliver and Raymond Roland, Roger Sherlock, Martin and Theresa McMahon, Joe Ryan and others too numerous to mention.

Towards the end of the 60s I started to think about moving out of London and away from my parents. So I got a job in Hersham, Surrey, and I worked there for about three months, but the job proved too difficult for the amount of training I had and I had to pack it in. Then I moved back to Ireland again in about November, 1969. I got a job with RTV Rentals in Killarney and started on 1st January, 1970. I had to work between Killarney and Tralee for about three months and then I got a permanent job in Tipperary town in April, 1970. I had this job for 31 years.

Back in 1970 when I moved to Tipperary, I didn't know anybody but, because I was a musician, I soon became acquainted with some local musicians from around the Cappawhite area. I also joined the local branch of Comhaltas Ceolteoirí Eireann and had the good fortune to meet my future wife, Catherine Ryan, with her parents, Tommy and Mary Ryan (R.I.P.). Catherine played drums. We got married in 1974 and we have a son called Denis (after Denis Murphy).

A good many years ago, (I think it was 1981), a woman approached me about the possibility of teaching her child to play the flute. I said I would give it a go. So I have been doing this ever since, more so since I retired from RTV in 2001. Music has been a tremendous aspect of my life. I don't know how I could live without being able to play or teach music. My son is also learning to play the fiddle now and hopefully the tradition will live on.

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## MEMORIES OF SCHOOLDAYS

*by Kate Mary Cremin*

**N**OW THAT we have arrived at the 'Departure Lounge' in our journey through life, much of our time is spent 'ag dul síos bóithrín na smaointe'. Many of the thoughts are centred around our schooldays even though I must be unique in not being able to recall my first day at school. My mother told me that Danny Keeffe of Nohoval took me to the Boys' School for a day when I was the tender age of two and a half. Hence that first day has evaded my memory. Officially, I was enrolled in Tureencahill Girls' School in July, 1938, where I remained until July, 1948. I attended that school from the age of four to fourteen years. It was a stone building comprising two rooms built in 1874. It was situated at Tureencahill Cross, but was demolished in 1950 and replaced by a more modern four-roomed building a few hundred yards away from the original building.

My National school had one room for the girls and one room for the boys. Two teachers taught in each room. The principal, Mrs. Sheehan, taught the senior and middle classes. The assistant, Mrs. O'Connell, taught the infants and first and second classes. A large blackboard on the easel formed the dividing line between senior and junior classes. The room was heated by a large open fire at one end. One large press held all Roll books and Records, as well as class copies and Readers in use at the time. The principal had use of the one table in the room. The desks and seats were a unit and each unit seated up to eight pupils.

Long stools by the walls seated the infants. Each teacher had a blackboard and easel and the principal had a blackboard on the wall at the lower end of the room. Maps of Ireland, Europe and the world hung from the walls at the senior end of the room.

Not all pupils could be seated at the same time and we took it in turns to stand or sit. All oral classes stood while classes alternated for writing. My teachers rarely sat during an oral lesson. Great emphasis was laid on handwriting. In infants class we had 'cláiríns' of slate on which we